

Classic Poetry Series

Sir Henry Newbolt

- poems -

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A Ballad of John Nicholson

It fell in the year of Mutiny,
At darkest of the night,
John Nicholson by Jalándhar came,
On his way to Delhi fight.

And as he by Jalándhar came,
He thought what he must do,
And he sent to the Rajah fair greeting,
To try if he were true.

"God grant your Highness length of days,
And friends when need shall be;
And I pray you send your Captains hither,
That they may speak with me."

On the morrow through Jalándhar town
The Captains rode in state;
They came to the house of John Nicholson,
And stood before the gate.

The chief of them was Mehtab Singh,
He was both proud and sly;
His turban gleamed with rubies red,
He held his chin full high.

He marked his fellows how they put
Their shoes from off their feet;
"Now wherefore make ye such ado
These fallen lords to greet?"

"They have ruled us for a hundred years,
In truth I know not how,
But though they be fain of mastery
They dare not claim it now."

Right haughtily before them all
The durbar hall he trod,
With rubies red his turban gleamed,
His feet with pride were shod.

They had not been an hour together,
A scanty hour or so,
When Mehtab Singh rose in his place
And turned about to go.

Then swiftly came John Nicholson
Between the door and him,
With anger smouldering in his eyes,
That made the rubies dim.

"You are over-hasty, Mehtab Singh," --
Oh, but his voice was low!

He held his wrath with a curb of iron
That furrowed cheek and brow.

"You are over-hasty, Mehtab Singh,
When that the rest are gone,
I have a word that may not wait
To speak with you alone."

The Captains passed in silence forth
And stood the door behind;
To go before the game was played
Be sure they had no mind.

But there within John Nicholson
Turned him on Mehtab Singh,
"So long as the soul is in my body
You shall not do this thing.

"Have ye served us for a hundred years
And yet ye know not why?
We brook no doubt of our mastery,
We rule until we die.

"Were I the one last Englishman
Drawing the breath of life,
And you the master-rebel of all
That stir this land to strife --

"Were I," he said, "but a Corporal,
And you a Rajput King,
So long as the soul was in my body
You should not do this thing.

"Take off, take off, those shoes of pride,
Carry them whence they came;
Your Captains saw your insolence,
And they shall see your shame."

When Mehtab Singh came to the door
His shoes they burned his hand,
For there in long and silent lines
He saw the Captains stand.

When Mehtab Singh rode from the gate
His chin was on his breast:
The captains said, "When the strong command
Obedience is best."

Sir Henry Newbolt

A Letter From the Front

I was out early to-day, spying about
From the top of a haystack -- such a lovely morning --
And when I mounted again to canter back
I saw across a field in the broad sunlight
A young Gunner Subaltern, stalking along
With a rook-rifle held at the read, and -- would you believe it? --
A domestic cat, soberly marching beside him.

So I laughed, and felt quite well disposed to the youngster,
And shouted out "the top of the morning" to him,
And wished him "Good sport!" -- and then I remembered
My rank, and his, and what I ought to be doing:
And I rode nearer, and added, "I can only suppose
You have not seen the Commander-in-Chief's order
Forbidding English officers to annoy their Allies
By hunting and shooting."
But he stood and saluted
And said earnestly, "I beg your pardon, Sir,
I was only going out to shoot a sparrow
To feed my cat with."
So there was the whole picture,
The lovely early morning, the occasional shell
Screeching and scattering past us, the empty landscape, --
Empty, except for the young Gunner saluting,
And the cat, anxiously watching his every movement.

I may be wrong, or I may have told it badly,
But it struck me as being extremely ludicrous.

Sir Henry Newbolt

Clifton Chapel

This is the Chapel: here, my son,
Your father thought the thoughts of youth,
And heard the words that one by one
The touch of Life has turn'd to truth.
Here in a day that is not far,
You too may speak with noble ghosts
Of manhood and the vows of war
You made before the Lord of Hosts.

To set the cause above renown,
To love the game beyond the prize,
To honour, while you strike him down,
The foe that comes with fearless eyes;
To count the life of battle good,
And dear the land that gave you birth,
And dearer yet the brotherhood
That binds the brave of all the earth.—

My son, the oath is yours: the end
Is His, Who built the world of strife,
Who gave His children Pain for friend,
And Death for surest hope of life.
To-day and here the fight's begun,
Of the great fellowship you're free;
Henceforth the School and you are one,
And what You are, the race shall be.

God send you fortune: yet be sure,
Among the lights that gleam and pass,
You'll live to follow none more pure
Than that which glows on yonder brass:
'*Qui procul hinc,*' the legend's writ,—
The frontier-grave is far away—
'*Qui ante diem periit:*
Sed miles, sed pro patria.'

Sir Henry Newbolt

Drake's Drum

Drake he's in his hammock an' a thousand miles away,
(Capten, art tha sleepin' there below?)
Slung atween the round shot in Nombre Dios Bay,
An' dreamin' arl the time O' Plymouth Hoe.
Yarnder lumes the Island, yarnder lie the ships,
Wi' sailor lads a-dancing' heel-an'-toe,
An' the shore-lights flashin', an' the night-tide dashin',
He sees et arl so plainly as he saw et long ago.

Drake he was a Devon man, an' ruled the Devon seas,
(Capten, art tha' sleepin' there below?)
Roving' tho' his death fell, he went wi' heart at ease,
A' dreamin' arl the time o' Plymouth Hoe.
"Take my drum to England, hang et by the shore,
Strike et when your powder's runnin' low;
If the Dons sight Devon, I'll quit the port o' Heaven,
An' drum them up the Channel as we drumm'd them long ago."

Drake he's in his hammock till the great Armadas come,
(Capten, art tha sleepin' there below?)
Slung atween the round shot, listenin' for the drum,
An' dreamin arl the time o' Plymouth Hoe.
Call him on the deep sea, call him up the Sound,
Call him when ye sail to meet the foe;
Where the old trade's plyin' an' the old flag flyin'
They shall find him ware an' wakin', as they found him long ago!

Sir Henry Newbolt

He fell among Thieves

'Ye have robb'd,' said he, 'ye have slaughter'd and made an end,
Take your ill-got plunder, and bury the dead:
What will ye more of your guest and sometime friend?'
'Blood for our blood,' they said.

He laugh'd: 'If one may settle the score for five,
I am ready; but let the reckoning stand till day:
I have loved the sunlight as dearly as any alive.'
'You shall die at dawn,' said they.

He flung his empty revolver down the slope,
He climb'd alone to the Eastward edge of the trees;
All night long in a dream untroubled of hope
He brooded, clasping his knees.

He did not hear the monotonous roar that fills
The ravine where the Yassîn river sullenly flows;
He did not see the starlight on the Laspur hills,
Or the far Afghan snows.

He saw the April noon on his books aglow,
The wistaria trailing in at the window wide;
He heard his father's voice from the terrace below
Calling him down to ride.

He saw the gray little church across the park,
The mounds that hid the loved and honour'd dead;
The Norman arch, the chancel softly dark,
The brasses black and red.

He saw the School Close, sunny and green,
The runner beside him, the stand by the parapet wall,
The distant tape, and the crowd roaring between,
His own name over all.

He saw the dark wainscot and timber'd roof,
The long tables, and the faces merry and keen;
The College Eight and their trainer dining aloof,
The Dons on the daëis serene.

He watch'd the liner's stem ploughing the foam,
He felt her trembling speed and the thrash of her screw.
He heard the passengers' voices talking of home,
He saw the flag she flew.

And now it was dawn. He rose strong on his feet,
And strode to his ruin'd camp below the wood;
He drank the breath of the morning cool and sweet:
His murderers round him stood.

Light on the Laspur hills was broadening fast,
The blood-red snow-peaks chill'd to a dazzling white;

He turn'd, and saw the golden circle at last,
Cut by the Eastern height.

'O glorious Life, Who dwellest in earth and sun,
I have lived, I praise and adore Thee.'
A sword swept.
Over the pass the voices one by one
Faded, and the hill slept.

Sir Henry Newbolt

Ionicus

With failing feet and shoulders bowed
Beneath the weight of happier days,
He lagged among the heedless crowd,
Or crept along suburban ways.
But still through all his heart was young,
A courage, a pride, a rapture, sprung
Of the strength and splendour of England's war.

From ill-requited toil he turned
To ride with Picton and with Pack,
Among his grammars inly burned
To storm the Afghan mountain-track.
When midnight chimed, before Quebec
He watched with Wolfe till the morning star;
At noon he saw from Victory's deck
The sweep and splendour of England's war.

Beyond the book his teaching sped,
He left on whom he taught the trace
Of kinship with the deathless dead,
And faith in all the Island race.
He passed : his life a tangle seemed,
His age from fame and power was far;
But his heart was night to the end, and dreamed
Of the sound and splendour of England's war.

Sir Henry Newbolt

Ireland, Ireland

Down thy valleys, Ireland, Ireland,
Down thy valleys green and sad,
Still thy spirit wanders wailing,
Wanders wailing, wanders mad.

Long ago that anguish took thee,
Ireland, Ireland, green and fair,
Spoilers strong in darkness took thee,
Broke thy heart and left thee there.

Down thy valleys, Ireland, Ireland,
Still thy spirit wanders mad;
All too late they love that wronged thee,
Ireland, Ireland, green and sad.

Sir Henry Newbolt

The Fighting Téméraire

It was eight bells ringing,
For the morning watch was done,
And the gunner's lads were singing
As they polished every gun.
It was eight bells ringing,
And the gunner's lads were singing,
For the ship she rode a-swinging,
As they polished every gun.

*Oh! to see the linstock lighting,
Téméraire! Téméraire!
Oh! to hear the round shot biting,
Téméraire! Téméraire!
Oh! to see the linstock lighting,
And to hear the round shot biting,
For we're all in love with fighting
On the fighting Téméraire.*

It was noontide ringing,
And the battle just begun,
When the ship her way was winging,
As they loaded every gun.
It was noontide ringing,
When the ship her way was winging,
And the gunner's lads were singing
As they loaded every gun.

*There'll be many grim and gory,
Téméraire! Téméraire!
There'll be few to tell the story,
Téméraire! Téméraire!
There'll be many grim and gory,
There'll be few to tell the story,
But we'll all be one in glory
With the Fighting Téméraire.*

There's a far bell ringing
At the setting of the sun,
And a phantom voice is singing
Of the great days done.
There's a far bell ringing,
And a phantom voice is singing
Of renown for ever clinging
To the great days done.

*Now the sunset breezes shiver,
Téméraire! Téméraire!
And she's fading down the river,
Téméraire! Téméraire!
Now the sunset's breezes shiver,
And she's fading down the river,
But in England's song for ever*

She's the Fighting *Téméraire*.

Sir Henry Newbolt

The Schoolfellow

Our game was his but yesteryear;
We wished him back; we could not know
The self-same hour we missed him here
He led the line that broke the foe.

Blood-red behind our guarded posts
Sank as of old and dying day;
The battle ceased; the mingled hosts
Weary and cheery went their way:

"To-morrow well may bring," we said,
"As fair a fight, as clear a sun."
Dear Lad, before the world was sped,
For evermore thy goal was won.

Sir Henry Newbolt

The Toy Band

A Song of the Great Retreat

Dreary lay the long road, dreary lay the town,
Lights out and never a glint o' moon:
Weary lay the stragglers, half a thousand down,
Sad sighed the weary big Dragoon.
"Oh! if I'd a drum here to make them take the road again,
Oh! if I'd a fife to wheedle, Come, boys, come!
You that mean to fight it out, wake and take your load again,
Fall in! Fall in! Follow the fife and drum!"

"Hey, but here's a toy shop, here's a drum for me,
Penny whistles too to play the tune!
Half a thousand dead men soon shall hear and see
We're a band!" said the weary big Dragoon.
Rubadub! Rubadub! Wake and take the road again,
Wheedle-deedle-deedle-dee, Come, boys, come!
You that mean to fight it out, wake and take your load again,
Fall in! Fall in! Follow the fife and drum!"

Cheerly goes the dark road, cheerly goes the night,
Cheerly goes the blood to keep the beat;
Half a thousand dead men marching on to fight
With a little penny drum to lift their feet.
Rubadub! Rubadub! Wake, and take the road again,
Wheedle-deedle-deedle-dee, Come, boys, come!
You that mean to fight it out, wake and take your load again,
Fall in! Fall in! Follow the fife and drum!"

As long as there's an Englishman to ask a tale of me,
As long as I can tell the tale aright,
We'll not forget the penny whistle's wheedle-deedle-dee
And the big Dragoon a-beating down the night,
Rubadub! Rubadub! Wake and take the road again,
Wheedle-deedle-deedle-dee, Come, boys, come!
You that mean to fight it out, wake and take your load again,
Fall in! Fall in! Follow the fife, and drum!"

Sir Henry Newbolt

The War Films

O living pictures of the dead,
O songs without a sound,
O fellowship whose phantom tread
Hallows a phantom ground --
How in a gleam have these revealed
The faith we had not found.

We have sought God in a cloudy Heaven,
We have passed by God on earth:
His seven sins and his sorrows seven,
His wayworn mood and mirth,
Like a ragged cloak have hid from us
The secret of his birth.

Brother of men, when now I see
The lads go forth in line,
Thou knowest my heart is hungry in me
As for thy bread and wine;
Thou knowest my heart is bowed in me
To take their death for mine.

Sir Henry Newbolt

Vitai Lampada

There's a breathless hush in the Close to-night --
Ten to make and the match to win --
A bumping pitch and a blinding light,
An hour to play and the last man in.
And it's not for the sake of a ribboned coat,
Or the selfish hope of a season's fame,
But his Captain's hand on his shoulder smote
"Play up! play up! and play the game!"

The sand of the desert is sodden red, --
Red with the wreck of a square that broke; --
The Gatling's jammed and the colonel dead,
And the regiment blind with dust and smoke.
The river of death has brimmed his banks,
And England's far, and Honour a name,
But the voice of schoolboy rallies the ranks,
"Play up! play up! and play the game!"

This is the word that year by year
While in her place the School is set
Every one of her sons must hear,
And none that hears it dare forget.
This they all with a joyful mind
Bear through life like a torch in flame,
And falling fling to the host behind --
"Play up! play up! and play the game!"

Sir Henry Newbolt